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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT

TUESDAY, SEPT. 5, 1939

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

SUBJECT: "QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S.D.A.

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For our question-and-answer session this week, I have gathered the recent letters about gardens and lawns that have been appearing in the mailbag.

The first question comes from a wise homemaker who is already getting her houseplants in for the winter. She asks: "Shall I take up the large geranium plants that have been in the garden border all summer or are cuttings better?"

Answer: Cuttings are better. A few good cuttings will give you hardier and better-looking plants to enjoy all winter and plant outdoors in the spring. You can root the cuttings in a box of sand if you keep them in a warm place. Then, later you can place them in pots of good soil. By spring they'll be ready to set out in your flower borders.

The second question comes from another homemaker who says she's fond of ferns inside the house but never has very good luck with them. She asks for advice on fern care.

Perhaps her trouble has come from not giving ferns enough sunlight. A good many people have the mistaken idea that ferns want to be kept out of the sunlight and in the shadow. Many a fine fern has sickened and died from lack of light. Ferns will get along for a time without sun but they thrive only when they have a reasonable amount of it. On the other hand, they can't take too much. They don't do well in a west window where they get the full force of the afternoon sun. If you have ever noticed ferns as they grow in the woods, you'll see that they take their sunlight filtered through the foliage of trees and shrubs. If you have a dark

(9/5/39)

corner of the room where you want a growing plant, try a philodendron vine. This handsome plant has large, heart-shaped leaves of velvety green. It comes from the deep jungles of the Tropics where it is accustomed to shade and warmth and plenty of moisture.

But to get back to ferns. Good soil for ferns is woods soil with plenty of leaf mold. Ferns need just enough water to keep that soil moist at all times but no more. If you let a fern become soaked or allow it to become dry, that's the beginning of trouble for your fern. It is very difficult not to overwater a fern in a jardiniere where a little too much water stands and backs up on the roots of the plant. By the way, in spring and summer ferns need much more watering than in fall and winter.

If your fern begins to dry up and turn brown on the tender ends of the fronds, you can make a good guess that the air is too dry for it. In most modern-heated homes the air is likely to be too dry for plant health--or for human health, for that matter. You can add moisture to the air by using pans of water on the radiators. (The steaming kettles on the stove are one reason why house plants in farm kitchens often thrive so well.)

Occasionally it's a good idea to set your ferns and other houseplants in the bath tub and wash the fronds or leaves very gently with weak soapsuds. (Take care not to let the soapy water drip down into the soil.) This washing clears dust from the leaves so that the plant can breath and take in sunshine more easily.

Ferns like all other plants have insect enemies. You may find a white wooly insect feasting on your fern close to the bottom of the fronds. If so, examine the plant every day and remove each insect you find with a toothpick. You can keep down red spiders or aphids by washing or spraying the top of the plant with clear water.

To keep your ferns in good condition apply a few drops of household ammonia or prepared plant food every two or three months.

(9/5/39)

Now here's a fall question about the lawn: "Is it a good idea not to rake up leaves from the lawn? I've been told that leaves form a protective covering for the grass during the winter and also help as fertilizer."

Answer: It is a common but mistaken idea that leaves help protect or fertilize the lawn. Leaves are likely to injure grass by smothering and shading it, especially when they lie thick enough to hide it. Leaves contain very little plant food. Unless they are completely decayed, they're worthless as fertilizer. If your grass is suited to your locality, it needs no protection during the winter.

Last question: "Will you give me some advice on my perennial bed? All my perennials have begun to spindle and look overgrown and thin out?"

Answer: You need to build a new bed for these plants and this is the season to do it. Take all the plants out and dig the bed 18 inches deep and replant it. If you need to improve the drainage, now is the time to lay a line of drain tile down the center of the bed, sloping the bottom of the bed in from both sides to the tile. Slope the tile to some outlet such as a hill or ditch. Lay a little coarse gravel over the tile, put in 6 inches of sandy soil, and then good topsoil thoroughly mixed with peatmoss well-rotted leaf mold or other high-grade humus. Over the top use a mixture of about equal parts old rotted manure, sand and topsoil, leave the bed about 2 inches high, it will settle. In this bed you can put delphinium, hardy phlox, aster and all the other favorites that come up year after year.

That concludes the questions for today.

